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The Emerging Theology of Life in  
Latin America

Mortimer Arias

The Theological Basis for a "Serviglesia"

Tomás Chávez, Jr.

En torno a la transfiguración

Juan Sigifredo Soto

"With childish folly to the war he came,  
Laden with store of gold."<sup>1</sup>

But the love of ornament, which is far from caring for  
virtue, but claims the body for itself, when the love of the  
beautiful has changed to empty show, is to be utterly expelled.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 872.

Reflexiones  
teológicas  
desde  
el  
margen  
hispano

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## PRESENTATION AND INVITATION

The present issue, including articles by three Hispanic pastors and church leaders, reflects the variety of views among our Hispanic Christian people as well as the obvious points of agreement. While the various views expressed here are not in total agreement, their very variety is a step towards the dialogue that **Apuntes** has always sought to foster.

At the same time, we wish to take this opportunity to remind our readers of a significant date that is approaching. October 12, 1992, will mark the fifth centennial of the encounter between races that gave birth to our present reality. This "Día de la Raza," as it has traditionally been called in Hispanic circles, should be the opportunity for serious reflection on our past and present realities. We must not allow this to become simply a bigger and noisier "Columbus day." Therefore, in the months and years to come, we shall particularly welcome contributions that help us reflect on the issues raised by this upcoming fifth centennial.

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# The Emerging Theology of Life in Latin America

*Mortimer Arias*

**W**hen we hear "Latin American theology," we immediately think of the "theology of liberation." And rightly so, because this was the first Latin American theology in five hundred years of Christianity south of the Rio Grande. The theology of liberation has been around for more than fifteen years. It is an obligatory partner in theological courses in Europe or the United States, and particularly in encounters of Third-World theologies, as can be seen in the Orbis series, beginning with **Theology in the Americas** in 1975, and coming to **Doing Theology in a Divided World** in 1984, edited by Sergio Torres and others.

One unmistakable sign of the vitality of this theologizing is the number and quality of theologians, themes and works coming from Latin America, dealing with Christology, Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, Missiology, Spirituality, and Social Ethics. Some of those names are in circulation around the country and around the world, such as Hugo Assmann, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, Hugo Echegaray, Segundo Galilea, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan P. Libanio, José Míguez Bonino, Pablo Richard, Jon Sobrino, Juan Luis Segundo, and Elsa Támez. But these names are just the translated tip of the iceberg of an ongoing theological production.

The other sign of the vitality of Latin American theology is the number and strength of its critics and enemies, both from the Catholic and Evangelical supposedly orthodox camps, and from political and ideological strategists. Latin American theologians have been pointing and responding to a wide range of critics and enemies, such as Candidate Reagan's think-tank ("Santa Fe Document," 1980); the Institute for Religion and Democracy (since 1981); former Executive Secretary and President of the Latin American Council of Bishops, Msgr. Alfonso López Trujillo; a group of Roman Catholic

bishops; and particularly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ("A Process of Attacks against the Church that is Born of the People," **Tempo e presença**, Rio de Janeiro, June, 1985). This process came to a dramatic climax more recently with the scrutinizing of Gustavo Gutiérrez' theology, the separation of Clodovis Boff from the Pontifical University in Rio de Janeiro, the "Instruction" of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith against the theology of liberation in general, and finally the silence imposed on Leonardo Boff by the Vatican Congregation "for a convenient period of time" (**Tempo e presença**, May-June, 1985; **The National Reporter**, Washington, D.C., April, 1984, etc.).

Our purpose here, however, is to introduce what might be called "a theology of life" that is emerging and taking shape in the wide breach opened by the theology of liberation.

### **A theology in the midst of death**

One striking think about this "theology of life" is that it is emerging in the midst of death!

The problem of death in most Latin American countries is not so much terminal illness, or life after death, but **life before death**. Death is omnipresent: the violent death of guerrilla warfare and state terrorism, and the silent harvest of death as the end product of a system of economic injustice and oppression. In the weekly reflection group of a poor neighborhood parish of Lima, an elderly lady said: "I am preparing myself to die; we, elderly people, are closer to death." To which a young girl replied: "No, grandma, that was in the old times, today children are closer to death." Yes. One million children die of diarrhea and malnutrition the first year of their lives in Latin America every year, because of the forced poverty of the masses.

And yet, Christian people celebrate life in the midst of death. This is one of the impressive features of the Basic Christian Communities—more than 300,000 over all Latin America—who celebrate through liturgy, Bible reading, planning and working together for the needs of the community, struggling against the powers in their own localities, and specially through joyful singing. There is a blossoming of new hymnology with contemporary



words from their daily life and the use of popular tunes of their rich folklore. The **Campesino Mass** of Nicaragua is a good example of this new song to the God of life, the God of the people, as can be seen in

"The Entrance Song"

You are the God of the poor,  
the human, unassuming God,  
the God who sweats in the street,  
the God with a withered countenance.

This is why I speak to you  
as my people speak,  
because you are God the laborer,  
Christ the worker.

You go hand in hand with my people,  
you struggle in the countryside and the city,  
you line up there in camp  
so they will pay you the day's wages.

You eat, scratching there in the park,  
with Eusebio, Pancho, and Juan José,  
and you complain about the syrup  
when they don't put much molasses in it.

These are the songs of a suffering people. I have seen the mothers of Sandinista youth, on Mothers' Day in a church in Managua, carrying red chrysanthemums according to the number of their children who died in the northern border with Honduras to defend the country from "contra" forays. There were tears in their eyes, but they were proud, and they were able to sing to the God of life the song of a better future for their people. Henri Nouwen, the well-known professor and author from Yale, came last year with a heart-rending message to his audience in the States: "Christ is being crucified again in Central America -and we are part of it!" Mgr. Oscar Arnulfo Romero, before he was assassinated at the altar in Hospital in San Salvador, said: "I must confess that, as a Christian, I don't believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people" (**Voice of the Voiceless**, Orbis, 1984).

This is what Gustavo Gutiérrez calls "paschal spirituality": suffering and dying and rising with Christ in the neighbor. This joyful life-affirming spirituality is rooted in God's grace and gratuitousness, out of spiritual

childlikeness and commitment to the neighbor in solidarity. This spirituality of life goes beyond solitude, and "through the dark night of injustice," into a living community. Naturally, this becomes the well-springs for a theology of life (**We drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People**, Orbis, 1984).

### **Living and Dying for Life**

These Christians are not driven by a martyr-complex; but they seem to have rediscovered the old Christian secret of finding life in dying, and dying for life. Take, for example, the case of Marianela García Villas, a young woman lawyer from El Salvador, a former congresswoman in her country, and the President of the Human Right Commission. She loved life. "The last thing I want to lose is my life," she wrote to a friend. But she had a concept of life that included giving your life for life:

To live is not to have more but **to be more**. The only way, to my understanding, of being more, is **to give life**, and to work for others, for the exploited, the oppressed, who give us the opportunity to feel ourselves as truly humans.

. . . . .

**To share** in all circumstances of life, specially the worse circumstances, with those who are the traditional victims of the system and its puppets, is what gives us the fullness of biens more: if they suffer we share their pain; if they are happy we share their joy; if they die, we share in their death; and if the live we collaborate with them to really live as human beings.

Marianela knew, after her tour in Europe promoting human rights in her country, that her return was dangerous. But she went back with her people. She was assassinated, after being tortured, by the Salvadoran army, when she was trying to escape with a group of women and children from the army's bombardments.

Jon Sobrino, the theologian from El Salvador, gives the theological meaning of this kind of commitment to life even through dying.

At the objective level the Church bears witness to



life; at the subjective level its testimony and holiness take the form of surrendering its own life. To put these general formulations into historical form: the Church in Latin America is bearing witness to a **just** life and it is surrendering its life in the specific form of **martyrdom**.

The ultimate will of God . . . is the life of human beings, and, concretely, a just life for human beings. This ultimate concern, precisely because it is ultimate, renders plausible the ultimacy called for in the witness of martyrdom. Conversely, death accepted in order that others may have life is an ultimately profound experience of God and the unqualified ultimacy of life. When one gives one's life for the life of others, one affirms by that very act the God of life. (**True Church and the Poor**, Orbis, 1984).

### **A Theology from Life**

So, this theology springs from the life of the people and from the life of the church in its commitment to human life in its fullness. One of the outstanding features of Christian mission in the last decade of captivity of Latin American peoples in their own land has been the involvement of the churches in the defense of life through the defense of human rights. This became a matter of life and death. Human rights assumed the character of a **status confessionis**, the dividing line between what was Christian or un-Christian. After all, human rights are the rights of life, the rights of the poor, the rights of God — the God of life. Latin American Christians were not concerned only with "civil" rights (voting rights and the like); but also with the social and economic rights that have to do with the basics of human life: the right to work, the right of access to the land, the right of union organizations that defend workers from the powers, the right to share in the income of the country, the basic rights to food, health, housing and education.

In this long struggle for the defense of human life, churches and Christian organizations (working with non-Christians as well) used all non-violent means available: Assemblies for Human Rights, Commissions for Justice and Peace, advocacy for prisoners of conscience, public

denunciations and publications, low-profile intercessions with authorities, monitoring of "missing persons," legal assistance to the victims and their families, demonstrations, hunger strikes and fastings. Sometimes it took a pathetic angle, like the "crazy mothers of Plaza de Mayo" in Buenos Aires, picketing with the pictures of their husbands, children or grandchildren, in front of the military government headquarters every Thursday for years. It was going to be the drop of water that eroded the stone of the seemingly unconquerable powers. "Human rights was a dirty word for our repressive regimes of the South. They never told me why I was abducted and kept incommunicado in prison for several weeks in my adopted country in 1980. But it became clear, through many hours of recorded interrogations, that they were mad at the Methodist Church —whose first national bishop I had been for six years— because of its stance on human rights.

Thousands of human lives were spared, suffering reduced, families reunited, prisoners released, tortured people rehabilitated, refugees and exiles sent abroad for protection, and only God knows how many tortures and executions were avoided through this intercessory ministry of the churches.

Gradually, the churches were discovering and fulfilling a multiple ministry of annunciation, consolation, and intercession —a whole gamut of ministries of life.

Out of this pastoral commitment to life the new theology of life began to find expression. The defense and promotion of human life became the obligatory **locus theologicum**.

### **A Theology for Life**

A theology of life has to do with real life, at all levels, and basically with the essentials of human life in its concrete situation in Latin America today. As Juan Stamm, the evangelical theologian from Costa Rica, summarizes it: 1) it has to be concerned not only with life in abstraction but with the **means** of life; 2) it has to deal with the human person as the subject of history; 3) it is committed to defend human dignity; 4) it has to affirm the meaning of dignity of the human body, its physical needs, pleasures and sufferings; 5) it has to point to the holistic character of work, as freedom and



creativity, not just a commodity; 6) it has to reject egotistic individualism and to insist on life in community; 7) it has to be authentically utopian, opening the horizon of the fullness of life and a world of justice and peace. (Elsa Tamez and Saúl Trinidad, eds., **Capitalismo, violencia y anti-vida**)

In a similar vein, Jon Sobrino rejects the theology that speaks of "true" life, "Christian" life and "eternal life," implying that "the elementary levels of life and the very act of living were data that had nothing to do with theology but only with nature and the socioeconomic sphere." On the contrary, insists the Salvadoran theologian,

This restoration of the elementary levels of life may seem a minimal achievement, but it is fundamental to an understanding of the Church's activity and of the experience of God via this activity . . . It is basic, nonetheless, because these levels are the foundation of all life, and unless they are taken into account it is vain to try to bear witness to a God of life. . . . Given the basic, primary needs that exist, any experience of God on this continent and any testimony of the Church must **logically** begin with them. (**The Church and the Poor**, 164-65)

In a very articulate and persuasive chapter on "The Epiphany of the God of life in Jesus of Nazareth," this theologian provides a solid foundation for the theology of life. Just to mention some of these theses, supported by New Testament evidence: 1) To Jesus, God's archetypal plan is for human beings to have life. Life in all its fullness, including its materiality, which explains Jesus' attitude towards the Jewish law and the matter of bread for all. 3) Lack of life is not caused by the limitations of what has been created, but rather by the free will of minority groups . . . who deprive the majorities of life in its various forms. 4) Jesus' understanding of a God of life comes into conflict with the private interests of those who do not want to give life to others. 6) The defense that Jesus makes of human life as fundamental mediation of the reality of God causes others to reproach and persecute him, the mediator. 7) The mediator of the true God is killed in the name of the false divinities. (**The Idols of Death and the God of Life**, Orbis, 1983)



## Unmasking the Idols of Death

To **announce** the God of life and the fullness of life in the Latin American context implies to **denounce** the powers and to unmask the idols of death. Latin American theologians are recovering with new force the fundamental biblical perspective on idolatry, particularly idolatry related to oppression, as it is dominant in the Old Testament, and recast in the New Testament in terms of Mammon, the idols of money, law and political powers. "In an oppressed world," says Pablo Richard, "evangelization must direct its attention to **idolatry, and not to atheism.**"

Fifty theologians and social scientists met in Costa Rica to analyze the "necrophilic system" under which Latin American masses live and die. For them, it was clear that global capitalism, and its form of "dependent capitalism" in the South, is not an atheistic system, but radically idolatrous. (Elsa Tamez and Saúl Trinidad, **Capitalism: Violence and Anti-Life**, San José, C.R., EDUCA, 1978, 2 vols., partially incorporated in **Idols of Death and the God of Life: A Theology**, Orbis, 1983).

Fran Hinkelammert, economist and theologian, has made a sharp analysis of capitalistic fetichism (**The Ideological Weapons of Death**, to be published by Orbis in English; Spanish edition by DEI, San José, C.R.). His chapter on "The Economic Roots of Idolatry: Entrepreneurial Metaphysics," is very indicative of this unmasking of idols. "Entrepreneurial metaphysics is the metaphysics of commodities, money, marketing and capital." It is rampant in everyday advertising, in widely accepted slogans about the economy, and in the specialized jargon of **Business Week** and the like. But it has a distinguished ancestry going back to John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, and Max Weber.

The rationale of "entrepreneurial metaphysics" goes something like this. There is a center of devotion towards the values of goods, money, market, and capital. These values and the rules of the market appear as the path of virtue, and its absence, or questioning, as the path of sin. Deviations are labelled "utopian," "subversive," and "terrorist." These assumptions are never perceived as metaphysics; they are presented as "reality," "nature of things," "laws of economy," etc. It is a fascinating world-view: the world is not inhabited by



human beings, but by commodities, which seem to exhibit human behavior, especially in the stock exchange: they engage in friendships and enmities, seductions and marriages, conflicts and open wars. They have "fever," "recession," "inflation," "infarcts," and "recovery" like a patient. Money is blood.

There is a particular concept of freedom attached to this view: to be able to exercise its dynamism, the commodity must be free. If the commodity is to be free, its price must be free, so the commodity can meet the challenge. Behind the commodity the business firm appears. If the entrepreneurs are to respond to the challenge, the firm must be free and society is free as well. This is not freedom for the people, but for the prices. This is the only freedom in the entrepreneurial metaphysics. Human rights are incidental. Entrepreneurs are supposed to save the dollar, not to save persons.

Latin American theologians do not hesitate in calling this sort of metaphysics or ideology "anti-life" and "idolatrous." They are painfully aware of the grimace of death in the face of this idol and of its destructive workings in their part of the world: the legitimation of the repressive regimes of National Security; the attacks against social programs and labor unions as the "enemy" of economic recovery (corporations and entrepreneurs are always innocent); "holly wars" against any country attempting to socialize some areas of the economy and improve the lot of the poorest, like Guatemala in 1954 or Nicaragua in the 1980s; the plundering of natural resources, the exploitation of cheap labor and the destruction of the environment; the external debts increasing every minute without any investment in productivity, mortgaging whole populations, the total value of exports, and future generations, just to keep the high interest rates and their loans "performing" in the banks of the First World, with the help of the dogmatic and totally insensitive policies of the International Monetary Fund . . . In one word: **DEATH**. Death for millions, profit and accumulation for a few.

More recently, in a paper presented in Germany on the anniversary of the Barmen Declaration, Frank Hinkelammert takes issue with Michael Novak and his affirmation that the Business Corporation is "a despised presence of God in the world," just as the Suffering

Servant of Isaiah 53. Hinkelammert accepts that both the state and the market are to be an institutional form of God's presence, provided they are "subordinated to the demands of concrete life for all people," adding,

Just for this reason, to confess the God of the fullness of life, implies a responsibility, before God, of political action for social justice, for peace, for the environment and for development. And for this reason the God of life is the God of the poor. This is the God of life we have to confess. And for this we need a new Confessing Church (**PASOS**, San José, C.R., No. 1, June, 1985, pp. 5f.)

Hinkelammert also reacts to Novak's image of the God of the Corporation as a transcendence over "the inner silence of every person," each individual in a pluralistic society, as in a desert, a camp of dead bodies, going through the dark night of the soul, with no use for the symbolic solidarity of traditional or socialistic societies. To which he says,

This is the negation of a God of life in its fullness, in whose place Novak puts a God as the transcendence of emptiness, as the opposite of fullness. As far as the mercantile relationships substitute for other social relationships, man remains absolutely alone in a blind struggle against all others. In this way, God is transformed into the transcendence of this loneliness, which is precisely emptiness. God has become a word for nothingness, a nihilist God.

And he concludes with a typical reference to the fundamental hope of Latin American theology:

What is at stake here in these theologies is the destruction of the hope of the kingdom of God and the necessary consequences for our lives (ibid., pp. 10-12).

Michael Novak was rebuffed at the University of Sao Paulo, while presenting his "theology of creation," commending the virtues of American capitalism to Brazil. Several ecumenical organizations repudiated his visit to promote the Portuguese version of his **The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism**, which is already circulating in Spanish among business people all over Latin America, as part of the campaign against the theology of liberation.



(**Tempo e presença**, Rio de Janeiro, May-June, 1985, p. 21). This is part of the militant context in which the theology of life is emerging.

They do not stop, however, at the stage of denunciation and unmasking of the idols, as can be seen in the last meeting of theologians and social scientists in Costa Rica, working critically on the validity of the utopian vision and "the organization of the hope of the people" (Raúl Vidales and Luis Rivera Pagán, eds., **La esperanza en el presente de América Latina**, San José, C.R., DEI, 1983), where the theme of life takes on a new turn.

### **From Life to Life: A New Hermeneutics**

Life is also becoming a decisive hermeneutical key, especially in the Basic Christian Communities. The Bible is read from life, and life is read from the Bible, in a dynamic relationship with the context. In a context of oppression and struggles for liberation, and of death and struggles for life, liberation and life surface as the fundamental lines of revelation in the Scriptures. The first outstanding example of this new hermeneutic of life (scholars have been talking about "the hermeneutical privilege of the poor") was the Sunday comments on the Gospel that Ernesto Cardenal had with the fisherfolk on the island of Solentiname, during the years of Somoza's repressive regime (**The Gospel in Solentiname**, Orbis, vols. I-IV).

Carlos Mesters, a biblical scholar from Brazil, has also spelled out this hermeneutics of life in the Christian Base Communities in his country. The Bible, says Mesters, is both the Book of God and the Book of the People.

The Bible illuminates life and life illuminates the Bible . . . To interpret the Bible without seeing the realities of life is like keeping salt apart from food. . . . The first book that God wrote was life—nature, history, reality. . . . The Bible was the second book. It did not come to replace life but to help us to understand better the meaning of life. God's presence and word in the midst of our reality. . .

Thus, to read and study the Bible without looking at the realities of the oppressed people in their

struggle for justice and fraternity, is unfaithful to the word of God and to the example of Jesus Christ. Like the Pharisees who knew but did not practice it. (**Flor Sem Defesa: Uma explicacao da Biblia a partir do povo**, Petropolis, Voces, 1983).

At a more sophisticated level, we have another example in Juan Luis Segundo's well known work **The Liberation of Theology**, where he points to Jesus' hermeneutics of life over against the Pharisees' authoritarian hermeneutics of the text. While they were concerned with orthodoxy, and what was permitted to do or not to do on the Sabbath day, Jesus went to the bottom line of life: "Is it lawful to save life or to kill?"

Now, one of the exciting by-products of this theologizing on life is that it provides a natural bridge of communication with the world outside, and becomes a powerful means of true evangelization. The same happened with the language and the stance on human rights during the long night of repression and terror in Latin America. It is striking to see in a satiric publication like **Humor** in Argentina (the first publication that was able to demythologize the power of the military in that country) the use of this language of the defense and affirmation of human life. Tomás Borge, the Minister of Government of Nicaragua, does not confess himself a member of a Christian church, but he read the Bible during the seven years he was in prison under Somoza, and works closely with some outstanding Catholic priests. At any rate, he has been able to perceive something of this theologizing of life and its language, as can be seen by his word to a Christian conference in his country:

Over against the theology of death, the true Christians have raised the theology of the resurrection. But, as far as I understand, not only the resurrection of the dead, but the resurrection of the living. You believe that to step out of the grave is not reduced only to come back to life, but to be reborn as a transformed person. This is why there is a point of contact—indeed and integration—of liberating Christianity and the revolution in the cause of national liberation; because the political project of liberation is nothing else than the project of life.

The issues of life are the issues of humanity, East



or West, North and South. In the context of survival under the nuclear threat, and of the painful quest for the quality of life, here in the developed North, why not a "theology of life"?

### *Resumen*

*El autor describe el auge que ha tomado el tema de la vida en el pensamiento cristiano latinoamericano. En medio del dolor de un pueblo oprimido, donde la muerte es experiencia cotidiana, no ya entre ancianos y enfermos, sino en todo el pueblo, va surgiendo una nueva forma de interpretar el mensaje de las Escrituras. El Dios de la Biblia es del Dios de la vida. Sus principales opositores son los dioses de la muerte. A base de esta perspectiva, surge todo un pensamiento que nos ayuda a comprender mejor el mensaje escriturario, y a comunicarlo a quienes no lo conocen.*

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## En torno a la transfiguración

*Juan Sigifredo Soto*

**L**a transfiguración de Cristo es transfiguración de su iglesia y de su pueblo redimido. La montaña de la transfiguración a donde fue Cristo con tres de sus discípulos llama a nuestro pueblo hispano a transfigurarse, a transformarse como un pueblo nuevo en su peregrinaje a través de la historia, a caminar hacia arriba puestos los ojos en "el autor y consumidor de la fe, Cristo Jesús".

Dios nos llama a subir montes altos para redescubrir el mensaje de la transfiguración desde una perspectiva hispana -y, para los que somos metodistas, wesleyana.

Lo primero que hemos de hacer es subir la montaña de la espiritualidad con Cristo; experimentar que el Espíritu del Señor está sobre nosotros. Que ese Espíritu nos guía hacia las alturas del perdón, del amor y de la paz. Desde las alturas del amor cristiano, que se diga de paso, tenemos que aprender a perdonar el pasado opresivo que vivieron nuestros antepasados. Ciertamente ellos fueron sometidos a discriminaciones y vejámenes que tenemos que perdonar. Fueron tiempos turbulentos y amargos cuando llevar un apellido hispano era una carga, o cuando nuestros niños descubrían que hablar el español en las escuelas públicas les era una desventaja. Necesitamos ahora olvidar aquellos tiempos cuando no nos era permitido a los hispanos entrar en ciertos lugares. Tenemos que poner el pasado oprobioso bajo la cruz del Calvario, y con un espíritu de amor pronunciar como pueblo unido desde las alturas un "Padre, perdónalos".



Nuestro pueblo debe proyectarse ahora hacia una nueva época, hacia un nuevo estilo de vida, y hacia una nueva perspectiva. Hemos de subir la montaña de la gracia redentora y de la santidad cristiana, buscando la comunión con el Dios revelado por nuestro Señor Jesucristo. Tenemos que marchar "olvidando ciertamente lo que queda atrás" y extendiéndonos a un futuro glorioso de triunfo y victoria dentro de una perspectiva hispana. El mismo Cristo toma en sus brazos a nuestro pueblo para levantarlo en su transfiguración. "Lo débil del mundo escogió Dios" para mover la historia.

El subir la montaña con Cristo significa autodisciplina, sacrificio, y el constante reto de ser cristianos comprometidos con una fe que nos hará crecer a la misma imagen de Dios. Recordamos que Zaqueo no se subió en la montaña de la transfiguración, pero sí lo hizo sobre un árbol. La estatura de su cuerpo lo obligó a subir para ver al Maestro Divino. Como hispanos tenemos el reto de subir la montaña del trabajo creador, de la honestidad, de la confianza y la fe en un Dios vivo y verdadero. Podemos transfigurar a nuestro pueblo por medio de la educación, del poder político y de los recursos económicos. En nuestra cultura una persona es respetada cuando tiene una buena educación, poder político, o dinero. Pero el elemento fundamental para nosotros es el poder espiritual que no se puede separar de las demás cosas aludidas.

El secreto de Juan Wesley para mover la Inglaterra de su tiempo fue la revolución espiritual que tuvo lugar dentro de su propio ser. Al sentir Wesley la certeza de su propia salvación, esto lo convirtió en evangelista y reformador social. La metamorfosis de la sociedad comenzó desde adentro hacia fuera. Nuestra gran tragedia es que hemos hecho una división entre lo evangélico y lo social. Creemos que si una persona es espiritual no se debe meter en los asuntos de este mundo. Con esa actitud les abrimos las puertas a las corrientes no espirituales para que manejen los destinos de nuestro pueblo hispano.

Además, hemos de ver en la montaña al Cristo transfigurado. Es notable observar las palabras del Evangelio de Lucas: "Y entre tanto que oraba, la apariencia de su rostro se hizo otra, y su vestido blanco y resplandeciente". Apesar de las tinieblas y contratiem-

pos, El se transfigura. No importa cuán densas sean las nieblas, El brilla. Los poderes demoniacos no pueden apagar su luz y su poder.

El Cristo transfigurado es un símbolo de progreso y victoria para nuestro pueblo hispano. Somos un pueblo llamado a transformarnos, a pesar de las oposiciones que confrontamos. El monte de la transfiguración es un símbolo de perfección cristiana y una lección de gloria anticipada para todos nosotros.

Somos llamados a ser santos. Pero santo no es el que huye de la sociedad escondiéndose dentro de las cuatro paredes del templo. El santo es el que puede decir un **no** rotundo frente al mal imperante y las injusticias que afectan a nuestro pueblo hispano.

La transfiguración de nuestra gente no es algo docético, sino real y verdadero. Más bien es una realidad que podemos palpar con nuestras manos y ver con nuestros ojos. "Hechos y no dichos." Somos llamados por Dios para llevar a cabo su propósito redentor en la historia. Dios ha tomado la iniciativa para manifestarse. Nos toca a nosotros ahora manifestar lo que hemos visto y experimentado en el Cristo transfigurado. Un ejemplo de esto, y señal de unidad entre los hispanos, lo hemos visto recientemente en el terremoto de México, las inundaciones de Puerto Rico y el volcán de Colombia. Esto muestra que nuestros pueblos han subido al menos al monte de la cooperación, de la ayuda y del amor cristianos.

La transfiguración de Cristo tiene mucha importancia para nuestra fe, para nuestra esperanza, y para nuestra vida toda. Encima de la montaña hemos de escuchar la voz de Dios. Los discípulos estuvieron tentados a escuchar las voces de Moisés y de Elías. Pero por sobre toda otra voz tenemos que oír la de Cristo.

El Cristo transfigurado no es sólo de la montaña, sino del presente, del hoy, de aquí. Es el Cristo de la paz, del amor, de la justicia, de la misericordia, de la ley y de la gracia. Es el Cristo de la revelación y de la fe. Y éste es el Cristo que nos llama a transfigurarnos y a participar en la transfiguración de nuestro pueblo.

Miremos en último lugar el descenso del Cristo transfigurado al valle del sufrimiento humano. Mi



profesor de historia de la iglesia, el Dr. Ramón Viñas, una vez nos habló de cierto adalid político que se subió tanto que no supo cómo bajarse." Y comentaba además que "así sucede a veces con los movimientos que no cuentan con la presencia de Dios." Cristo supo bajarse de la montaña. Y cuando llegó al valle del sufrimiento encontró que los nueve discípulos que había dejado atrás no podían sanar a un joven lunático. En la dialéctica del monte de la transfiguración y del valle del sufrimiento se halla el pueblo de Dios. Este mensaje nos llama a identificarnos con el dolor humano y con aquéllos que sufren. No podemos vivir en las alturas sin tocar la tierra. En el valle del sufrimiento nos encontramos con un número impresionante de centroamericanos y de hispanos de todas las latitudes que vienen en busca de refugio y de una mejor vida. La iglesia del valle está llamada por medio de sus agencias a darles servicio a los que sufren y lloran.

Volviendo al punto de partida, afirmamos que la transfiguración del pueblo hispano ocurre cuando se identifica con el Cristo que sufre y padece junto con los pobres, los oprimidos y los desarraigados. Hay gentes en nuestro pueblo que no quieren subir la montaña, que no quieren esforzarse, que no quieren cambiar. Hay otros que han llegado arriba, pero a quienes no les importan los que están abajo. Pero hay también otros que están en el valle del sufrimiento humano luchando junto con el pueblo en sus tragedias y dificultades precisamente porque han subido al monte de la transfiguración.

### *Summary*

*Taking as his cue the contrast between the Mount of Transfiguration and the descent to cure one who was possessed, the author argues for the need for the Hispanic people to live in a dialectic in which they are able to identify with those who suffer precisely because they have themselves been transfigured.*

## The Theological Basis for a "Serviglesia"

*Tomás Chávez, Jr.*

In a unique area where the most affluent nation in the world comes to face with a poverty stricken "Third World nation," separated from it only by a border that is 1500 miles long, the people of God are called to show active concern for the poor and the powerless. This is particularly true for the Chicano called to serve in this area and under these circumstances. It is out of this calling and responsibility that a number of Christian leaders and congregations along the border have developed the notion of a "serviglesia," thus closely binding together the church with its very nature as a serving community.

According to the New Testament, those who call themselves Christians are the New Israel, the New People of God. The Bible says that the Church is a people who have received forgiveness, a redeemed people, a chosen people. We are a people of the Covenant, and this makes us a people called by God to be a servant people (Gen. 12:1-3).

The Bible describes the church in many ways, and including many facets of its work. We are called to be a gathered community (ekklesia); a proclaiming church (kerygma); a teaching church (didache); a celebrating church (doxologia); a fellowship (koinonia). And we are also called to be a healing church (iasis) and a serving church (diakonia).



The preaching of the Good News, proclaiming what God has done, is always the primary duty of the church. But God expects and demands a response from those who hear the Good News. God wants a people whose faith is active in love (Gal. 5:6). God has acted in Christ to liberate us; and to that action he expects a response. God has given us so much, has done so much for us, that we are now expected to produce "good fruits." Jesus taught that much is expected from those who have been given much (Luke 12:48). This is the place of good works, which are the "fruits of the faith."

What is our response when the church stands in the midst of an impoverished, powerless, and divided community? What do we do about the frustrated, dependent and aggressive conglomerate of human beings among whom we move and live? These conditions go against human dignity and against God's design for the inhabitants of this community. Human dignity resides in God's image and likeness that stands at the center of each human being's very existence (Gen. 1:26). People, according to God's design, are to subdue their environment and control their destiny by their responsible participation in their surroundings, of family as well as of community and society (Gen. 1:28).

The Bible has much to say about the responsibility of the church to the poor and the powerless. It tells us that the people of God have a special responsibility toward the poor and the oppressed. It reminds us that the people of God are to have a lifestyle that shows a concern for the poor and the powerless. This concern must go hand in hand with our communion with the God who created us.

In the beginning of the Decalogue the people of God are reminded of what God has done for them. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2; Deut. 5:6). God enters into a special relationship with the people and delivers them from slavery. After reminding them, God tells them that a response is expected from them. The theme runs through all of Scripture, of God's act of deliverance, the special relationship of the Covenant, and the expected response of the people of God. Jesus explained this response in simple yet profound terms (Matt. 22: 37-39).



A particular example of this is the concern of the entire Law for the stranger. This concern for the stranger is based on the remembrance that the people of God were themselves strangers whom God delivered, and who therefore must now show a similar concern for the strangers among them. God is watching over the rights of the strangers.

Other laws prohibit oppressing the poor with interest rates (Exodus 22:25) and make provisions for the poor to gather from the fields and to have special concessions every seventh year. There is also the concern that the poor must have fair treatment in the courts (Exodus 23: 6). In Deuteronomy we see the same concern for the poor. The tithe is not just for the levites; it is also for the support of the poor (Deut. 14: 28-29; 26: 12-15). We are to be generous to the poor and the powerless in caring for them (Deut. 15: 7-11). The legal rights of the poor are to be safeguarded (Deut. 24: 17-18). At the same time, there is a warning that the poor are not to be shown favoritism just because they are poor (Exodus 23: 3).

We are a people who are constantly reminded of our special covenant relationship with God (Lev. 18:1-5; 20:26; 22: 31-33). Leviticus adds its words to Exodus and Deuteronomy in the command to leave a portion of the harvest to the poor and the alien (19: 9-10), to give impartial justice in court (19:15), to protect the stranger (19: 33), and to care for the poor (25:35-38) and honor the elderly (19: 32).

This concern is also seen in the other writings of the Old Testament, and not just in the prophets, who are well known for it. The need for a response of caring for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the poor and the aged, all of whom are powerless, runs throughout Scripture. Prov. 21: 13 reminds us that we cannot ignore the poor. As the people of God, we must watch over the legal rights of the poor (Prov. 29: 7), for the person who is concerned about the legal rights of the poor finds happiness (Prov. 14: 21). Oppressing the poor is an insult to God himself (Prov. 14: 31). And God repays what we do on behalf of the poor (Prov. 19: 17).

The central characteristic of the lifestyle of the people of God is to care for the widow, the orphan, and



the poor. This, which is clear in the Old Testament, is also true in the New. Jesus states this concern in the great judgment (Matt. 25: 31-46), indicating that what we did or did not do for the powerless will be taken into account. Christ the King will declare to his people that when they cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner, they actually encountered him in the midst of an impoverished world.

This is the type of "pure" religion that the New Testament offers. Pure religion must include visiting the orphans and the widows in their affliction, and keeping oneself unstained from the world (James 1: 27). So religion is a practical style of life for the people of God. We cannot simply say to the person who is cold and hungry to go in peace. What that person needs is not mere good wishes, but rather food and clothing (James 2: 14).

But we are also to recognize that we are not simply to give food and clothing without proclaiming the Gospel. The people of God are those who have heard and believed, and now proclaim, the Good News of what God has done in Christ.

It is on this basis that many of us near the border believe that the church must become a "serviglesia," a servant church.. This is a church that proclaims the Gospel, the Good News, by word and deed, while at the same time advocating for the powerless and the oppressed; one that feed the hungry with both food and spiritual nourishment. God's redeemed people have always had the calling and the responsibility to be this kind of community.

### *Resumen*

*Se exponen en este ensayo las bases de la "serviglesia", un modo de entender la naturaleza de la iglesia que es particularmente apropiado entre el pueblo hispano de la frontera. Tal "serviglesia" ha de proclamar el Evangelio tanto de palabra como con obras, alimentando a las gentes tanto con comida como con alimento espiritual.*

